UNITED
NATIONS

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Economic and Social
Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.4/1992/NGO/16
30 January 1992

ENGLISH
Original: FRENCH

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Forty-eighth session
Agenda item 7

QUESTION OF THE REALIZATION IN ALL COUNTRIES OF THE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS CONTAINED IN THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONVENANT ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS, AND STUDY OF SPECIAL PROBLEMS WHICH THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES FACE IN THEIR EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE THESE HUMAN RIGHTS, INCLUDING: PROBLEMS RELATED TO THE RIGHT TO ENJOY AN ADEQUATE STANDARD OF LIVING; FOREIGN DEBT, ECONOMIC ADJUSTMENT POLICIES AND THEIR EFFECTS ON THE FULL ENJOYMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND, IN PARTICULAR, ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECLARATION ON THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT

Written statement submitted by the International Federation Terre des Hommes, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following communication, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[17 January 1992]

Women and the realization of economic, social and cultural rights

1. Despite the progress of democracy in various parts of the world, a majority of human beings still do not enjoy the full realization of their economic, social and cultural rights. Among them, women occupy an important place. While their role in production and the protection of cultural identity is primordial, women are only seldom granted the opportunity to express their

views and to exercise their hard-won rights. Furthermore, poverty is not shared equally between men and women, and all too often it is women who find themselves ranked among the most underprivileged.

2. Today, one woman in three is unable to read or write, more than 60 per cent of illiterates in the world are women and over 60 per cent of children not attending school are female. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), illiteracy has a negative impact on almost all aspects of health. Inability to read and write makes it impossible to follow simple medical directions. Illiterates more commonly have habits of life that are detrimental to health and they do not always know where to apply for medical care.

3. The health of children depends largely on the mother's standard of education. The implementation of child welfare programmes is facilitated when the mother is able to read. Literate mothers are more likely to break with unhealthy traditional practices and women who have reached a certain standard of education are better prepared to avail themselves of health care services.

4. According to UNESCO, there is a correlation between education and the rate of infant mortality, which is considerably lower when the mother is able to read and write. In Pakistan and Indonesia, for example, the infant mortality rate was as much as 50 per cent lower in the case of mothers with four years of primary education. Furthermore, mothers who are literate have fewer children than those who are not, and they also have a different attitude towards their children, in particular girls, to whom they pass on more of the benefits of education.

5. In sub-Saharan Africa, two thirds of women over 25 years of age are illiterate. The figure is even higher in rural areas. In most countries of this region, women account for barely 30 per cent of all university students. 1/ In Zaire, from the age of three onwards, girls are given various household jobs to alleviate the burden on their mothers. Their school performance declines further as they grow older, since they are kept at home more and more to carry out various household tasks.

6. In Bangladesh, girls attend school less frequently than boys, even though primary education has been compulsory and free since 1990. Parents prefer to send their boys to school as they are the ones who later on will have to provide for their needs, whereas girls are bound to marry and leave home.

7. Besides illiteracy, another fact of daily life for women is that they must often work as well as looking after their children. In the developing world, the effects of industrialization and urban migration, together with the economic recession of the 1980s, have forced an increasing number of women to look for paid jobs, usually in addition to their daily household occupations. Many are employed in the informal sector, where their labour is underpaid but often constitutes the principal source of family income, particularly in the case of single-parent families. Necessity may oblige women with very young children to work. This obviously creates an additional concern for them, that of finding adequate care for their children, since in almost all world cultures this task is also the mother's responsibility.

8. In practice, it may prove very difficult to find adequate child care, with the result that women have to accept underpaid jobs which offer greater flexibility. A study carried out in Mexico 2/ showed that most actively employed women took their children with them to their places of work, entrusted them to relatives, neighbours or their older children, or indeed left them on their own, sometimes attached to their beds.

9. Changes due to modernity, migration and economic recession have also undermined the structures of the extended family and grandparents are less and less available to look after young children. In urban environments, the services provided by the family or neighbours often involve a degree of reciprocity, which may prevent women from exercising a regular activity. The model of the extended family may also oblige young children, almost always girls, to leave school to look after smaller children. This system is harmful both to the child providing care and to the child who has to be cared for.

10. In the developing countries, the situation of women in rural environments may be precarious. They generally live in poverty, and work without respite serving their family while at the same time providing labour for the traditional agricultural sector. They take an active part in family-based production, which is not recognized as such, being considered a domestic activity, and only very rarely have the opportunity to own land and obtain small loans.

11. According to UNESCO, recent studies on the distribution of food in rural families show that malnutrition affects women more severely than men. In the poorest sections of the population, the infant mortality rate is higher among girls than boys. Pregnant women and women who breast-feed are also under-nourished, reducing their children's chances of survival. In some rural areas of Zaire, for example, meals are served separately and in an unequal manner. Boys and their fathers are generally served at table and are entitled to the best food whereas daughters and their mothers eat in the kitchen and have the task of clearing the table.

12. Lastly, the daily timetable of female occupations in rural environments is for the most part overloaded and allows little time for leisure, culture and the education of children. In general, rural women begin their day at dawn, at about 5 a.m., and continue until 8 to 10 p.m., representing a working day of at least 15 hours. In addition to their agricultural work, they have many family obligations. Rural women help their spouses to grow, harvest and transport agricultural products, and are usually responsible for processing and selling them. Rural women deal with the housework, look after the children and sometimes engage in handicraft activities. They often have to cover long distances, carrying wood, water and farm produce or accompanying their children.

13. In Bangladesh, for example, rural women rise on average two hours earlier than their husbands and enjoy no free time during the day, whereas their spouses have roughly three hours of leisure per day.

14. In Africa, it has been calculated that women work on average 13 hours more per week than men. 3/ In Zaire, according to one study made in a rural region, women work in the fields cultivating food crops virtually alone and cash crops together with their husbands. Yet their share in the income derived is markedly lower than that of the men. In the region studied, a woman's day extends from 5 a.m. to about 9 p.m., and includes many arduous tasks such as milling and fetching water and wood. Pregnant women continue to work until they give birth, a practice which causes many complications sometimes costing the life of the mother and the child. When the baby is one month old, the mother carries him on her back or leaves him on his own. At three months, she entrusts the baby to her daughters, generally aged between five and seven. Young girls in the region studied often experience a fate which is just as unenviable as that of the mother, whom they must help in all her tasks.

15. In conclusion, the International Federation Terre des Hommes would like to recommend to the Commission on Human Rights that it invite all States concerned:

(a) To establish, where necessary, a system of literacy education suited to the needs and timetable of working women;

(b) To improve social measures in order to enable all working women to find a satisfactory solution regarding care of their children;

(c) To transform their legislation in order to grant women the opportunity to own land and obtain loans and to avail themselves of all the facilities of daily life enjoyed by men and the population in general.

Notes

1/ "Hard Work, Small Gain for Women in Africa", Africa Recovery, September 1991, pp. 46-47.

2/ "Child Care: Meeting the Needs of Working Mothers", SEEDS, No. 13, 1991, p. 3.

3/ Africa Recovery, pp. 46-47.